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DNR's low-key response to Kewaunee's water crisis not nearly enough

Nancy Utesch | Kewaunee farmer Jun 10, 2017

CAFO runoff



Nancy Utesch

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The Department of Natural Resources' recent low-key roll-out of help for Kewaunee County residents dealing with contamination so great that they cannot drink nor should they bathe in their water highlights the DNR's continued failures, lack of integrity, and continued lack of urgency in responding to Kewaunee's health and water crisis.

While Kewaunee attempts to apply tourniquets to this massive problem where we live, the DNR continues to approve more concentrated animal feeding operations and CAFO expansions. Our animal numbers have surpassed the 98,000 mark, while our human population is roughly 20,500.

This burgeoning problem, akin to pouring gasoline on the fire, is rarely discussed — nor is the reality that we can no longer shoulder the burdens of the intensive farming taking place where we live and the resulting water contamination, human health threats, plunging property values, and severe quality of life issues that are as widespread as our growing water contamination rates.

Instead, the DNR, Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, Public Service Commission, Gov. Walker and industry interests make silver-bullet promises of fertilizer plants, biogas plants, digester cures and more remedies — but don't discuss actually curtailing the addition of more cows in our county and the massive contaminating waste that's generated. Initiatives by local farmers addressing conservation practices are slowly being implemented, but lack of DNR oversight and enforcement

of CAFOs continues to be a major problem, and safeguards such as herd caps and in-ground monitoring wells at lagoon sites and spreading fields continue to be contested in court.

Make no mistake, citizens and various attorneys, including Midwest Environmental Advocates, have done the heavy lifting on the manure situation in Kewaunee. This process of addressing our water crisis has taken many years, multiple dollars, and extensive personal time by citizens engaged in work groups and meetings.

In 2014, Judge Jeffrey Boldt described Kewaunee's crisis as "deplorable ... massive regulatory failure." A legislative audit of the DNR in June 2016 exposed the fact that the DNR failed to follow its own policies on water quality issues 94 percent of the time. On the latest research findings, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Mark Borchardt stated: "We have never seen this level of contamination before."

Work groups engaged stakeholders for over a year, formulating recommendations for addressing the problems that plague our community and its water, only to have Gov. Scott Walker gut the recommendations after meeting with industry interests, with the Dairy Business Association claiming rule revisions would make dairy farmers scapegoats.

Many Kewaunee residents living with water contaminated by bovine manure have absolutely no idea what the DNR's plans are, or how their household can receive help. Homeowners are not only left with the very expensive cleanup costs of well remediation, but must also decipher what system would work in their home, and effectively address their particular contamination issue. Politicians touting low-cost loans to address the contamination offer

little solace to citizens suffering from water contamination due to no fault of their own. New wells have been drilled, only to have them come up contaminated in a short duration of time.

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Kewaunee County deserves much, much more from the DNR, the Natural Resources Board, and DNR Secretary Cathy Stepp than their shouting in a low whisper that help is on the way. Kewaunee is awaiting the DNR's plan on how it will partner with our local Land and Water Department, our health department and local leadership to not only make good on the delivery of water to those in need, but to employ education, outreach and, if needed, a door-to-door campaign to raise awareness of the DNR's ability to provide water.

Kewaunee's citizens will also continue to pursue a request included in the Safe Drinking Water Act petition filed in October 2014 — that is, that the EPA help protect our community through a further comprehensive investigation to find the sources and extent of our widespread contamination.

Kewaunee County citizens will not be silenced, nor will they accept low-key aid from the DNR, which should be responding with the urgency that Kewaunee's contamination rates warrant, recognizing that clean water is a necessity and essential human right.

Nancy Utesch is a farmer from Kewaunee and a petitioner of the Safe Drinking Water Act, filed to the EPA in October

2014, about Kewaunee's water crisis.